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SUBJECT: MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS FALL WELL BELOW DEMOCRATIC STANDARDS

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Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) As expected, Belarus January 14 municipal elections failed to meet any international democratic standard. The U.S. Embassy and EU released statements January 15 criticizing the GOB for failing to observe democratic principles. The election authorities have not released preliminary vote tallies, but we do not expect the opposition to pick up more than a handful of the 22,000 seats up for grabs. International observers were not allowed to take part; however, domestic pro-democracy candidates and observers reported to the Embassy's informal observation team that election commissions and local authorities regularly denied observers access to voter information and prevented them from adequately observing the vote count. Although Emboffs encountered harassment from security services and were restricted from conducting normal observation activities, their participation generated many thanks from the local and regional opposition community. End summary.

¶2. (C) On January 14, five teams of Emboffs traveled to regional cities Brest, Grodno, Baranovichi, and Borisov, the rural villages of Beloozyorsk and Beryoza, and throughout Minsk city to observe the local council elections under restricted conditions. (Note: The Belarusian MFA's Americas Desk Director Sergey Sergeyev in a January 5 meeting warned Charge that Emboffs were not allowed to enter polling stations, monitor the vote count, or observe election commission meetings. End note.) Emboffs, therefore, were restricted to meeting with pro-democracy candidates and observers outside polling stations and escorted by ideology officers, the Belarusian KGB, and cameramen (see para 12). Although the final results of the elections are not yet available, Emboffs' observations indicate that the election process was far from transparent or democratic.

Preliminary Results

¶3. (C) The Central Election Committee (CEC) has yet to provide preliminary information on vote tallies in the local races. However, coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich claimed that only two out of the 22,640 elected deputies were opposition candidates. Pro-democracy observers informed Emboffs that none of their opposition candidates were elected to the councils. (Note: In the 2003 local council elections, approximately 80 opposition candidates won seats. End note.) The CEC told journalists that the final results would not be ready until January 18.

Voter Turnout Likely Lower Than Official Number

¶14. (C) Head of the CEC Lidiya Yermoshina on January 15 announced that 79 percent of Belarus' seven million voters cast their ballots, electing 22,640 deputies to 1,581 local councils. However, Emboffs' contacts in Minsk and in the regions claimed far less voter participation, ranging from 30 to 60 percent. In an attempt to boost voter turnout, authorities tried to create a festive atmosphere at nearly all polling stations: e.g., music and/or live concerts, food and drinks at discount prices.

Opposition Reported No Access To Information

¶15. (C) In all cities, opposition activists informed Emboffs that the heads of precinct election commissions regularly refused observers access to voter lists and would not report the number of ballots issued to each precinct or the percentage of the electorate that voted in the early election process. Pro-democracy observers noted that without this information, it was impossible to determine if the number of votes corresponded with the number of people who actually voted and it would be difficult to identify other vote manipulations such as gerrymandering or multiple voting.

Early Voting Not Transparent

¶16. (C) A serious complaint from pro-democracy observers was that the early voting process, which started on January 9, was not at all transparent. Observers again were denied voter lists, lists of immobile people requesting home voting, and final percentages. In addition, pro-democracy observers repeatedly informed Emboffs that they witnessed early voting ballot boxes with the seal already broken and election

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commission heads and other "unauthorized" individuals at polling stations after hours holding discussions around the ballot box.

Keeping a Distance From the Ballot Box

¶17. (C) All observers reported that they were not allowed near the ballot box, some claiming they were to stand at least 20 meters away. Such distances made it practically impossible to determine if votes were being counted properly. However, close proximity to the ballot box would not have made much difference, as observers informed Emboffs that the election commission members during vote count surrounded the ballots and ballot box, preventing anyone from watching.

The Less Than Perfect Vote Count

¶18. (C) Opposition observers after the vote count reported to Emboffs that the count was not transparent. Despite the observers' distance from the ballot box and the commission members' knack for blocking all views of the count, pro-democracy observers were able to document several questionable instances. In Brest, for example, commission members of one precinct counted all the ballot boxes simultaneously, including the one for early voting, whereas accepted practice is to count each one individually. An observer in another polling station reported that after the votes were tallied, the head of the commission sent the ballots to the city executive committee to "check the results," despite being told by observers that the executive committee had no authority to view the ballots.

Biased Election Commissions and Observers

¶9. (C) The precinct election commission heads were often factory supervisors or school directors and the rest of the commission members were their subordinate workers or teachers. Non-opposition observers usually represented labor collective groups of the same factory or institution that the election commission members were from. When speaking to Emboffs outside the polling stations, these observers were quick to call the election process free and fair. However, when posed with questions about voter turnout or reported violations in their polling station, the most common answers from these observers were, "I do not know" or "I did not see anything." Pro-democracy observers mentioned that ideology officers regularly visited with commission heads and police officers, who were present inside each polling station although official regulations prohibited this.

Keeping Out Those Pro-Democracy Observers

¶10. (C) Most pro-democracy observers accused election commissions and authorities of attempting to prevent them from monitoring the election process. On more than one occasion, Emboffs heard of observers being denied access to polling stations for various reasons. At a Brest polling station, police detained an observer and pro-democracy local council candidate for allegedly parking his car improperly and then held him as a suspect in a car accident. Yuriy Gubarevich, an opposition observer and local council candidate in Beloozyorsk informed Emboffs that authorities issued a list of "offenses" to election commissions that would be grounds for an observer's dismissal. As Gubarevich predicted, an election commission used a reason on the list to dismiss a pro-democracy candidate from the polling station before the vote count began.

BHC

¶11. (C) At a January 15 press conference, the human rights NGO Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) announced that the January 14 local council elections did not have the characteristics of free and fair elections in regards to OSCE standards. (Note: The U.S. and EU embassies provided financial support for BHC's monitoring efforts. End note.) The BHC concluded that the GOB had not fixed one problem in the election process that the OSCE had noted in the last presidential and parliamentary elections. The primary problem was the lack of observers' access to voter lists, the number of ballots issued to each precinct, and the number of early election votes. According to the BHC, the voter lists remained a "tightly held secret" and, therefore, BHC observers did not have the information needed to check for voter fraud. The BHC declared that the election process was

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neither an election, nor a process, and did not provide all citizens equal opportunities of participating. The BHC will publish a final report in the next several weeks.

Security Services Show Ugly Side

¶12. (C) Local authorities, ideology officers, and the Belarusian KGB tried to control Emboffs' trip and meetings with observers. In Brest, thuggish KGB brutes sought to intimidate Emboffs while the ideology officers and cameramen provoked pro-democracy observers and candidates with insults. In Grodno, local police and BKGB surveillance units continuously phoned in to their superiors to inform them on Emboff's destination and content of meetings. In Beloozyorsk, the BKGB officer would counter all statements made by pro-democracy observers and interrupt them in mid-sentence. In all the trips, Emboffs' contact with residents and opposition activists were filmed.

Comment

¶13. (C) Unfortunately, Emboffs were not surprised at what they heard or saw during Election Day and neither were pro-democracy candidates and observers. Although Emboffs were restricted in monitoring the elections, their participation in the process was noted in the independent press and even by Central Election Committee Head Lidiya Yermoshina. Emboffs received many thanks from their contacts in the cities and were often told that their visits were likely the reason local authorities had not arrested as many opposition activists as expected. The candidates we spoke with -- whether fervent democracy supporters just out of university or more established activists -- pursued their campaigns bravely, knowing their chances of success were virtually non-existent. Their continued commitment and enthusiasm -- in the face of dictatorship -- is essential for Belarus to have any hope of a democratic future.

Stewart